

The Low Birthrate.

ITS CAUSES AND RESULTS.

A SERMON BY THE REV. JAMES SIMPSON, M. A.
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At the recent session of our Provincial Synod, a resolution was passed expressing deep anxiety at the abnormally low birth-rate in the Province of Ontario; and a committee was appointed to consider the whole subject of vital statistics for the Ecclesiastical Provinces.

This matter has produced a good deal of comment in the secular press, and of necessity must, in the near future, demand the very serious attention of the community at large. For not only is Ontario suffering in this respect, but many other parts of Canada as well; and I am certain that if we had any means of obtaining statistics for this Province, we should make almost as poor a showing as the more western ones. Nor does it apply to our Dominion alone. At the Church Congress held at Bradford England, last month, the Dean of Ripon raised the note of alarm, and said: "If this state of things went on, it was a case in which the nation must go down. It would be a case of national suicide, which was all the more terrible to them as Christians, because it meant the forsaking of the natural law of God. For the sake of what? For the sake of a wretched calculation and childless homes where luxury and ease should dwell."

The question is, also, becoming a very live one in the United States, and not before its time; while France is actually at a standstill with regard to its population, the annual excess of births over deaths being only one per thousand inhabitants throughout the whole country; and deaths are in excess of the births in nearly half of the eighty-seven departments, or counties.

You will gain a better idea of the variation of the birth-rate in different places if I give you a few statistics. In the year 1895 the birth-rate in the Province of Quebec was about 38 for every 1000 inhabitants; in England it was 30½ per 1000; in France, nearly 22; in Ontario, only 18½. Thus, you see, the rate in Ontario was lower than that of France, and only half of that of Quebec. In 1896 there was a slight improvement in Ontario, the rate being 20½ per 1000, but this was probably the result of a new and more stringent registration act which came into force at that time. But the chief cause of alarm is not so much that any one year shows a low birth-rate in any one country; but that for the last quarter of a century there has been an almost steady decrease. In 1874 France's rate was 26½, now it is only 22; England's was 36, now it is 30½; Germany's was 40, now it is 35½, and so on.

What is the cause of this? It has been claimed that the poor showing in the Province of Ontario is due to a certain extent to defective registration, and this may be partly true. It is quite possible that a number of births, especially in the country districts, are not registered, although one would imagine that this would apply equally well to the country districts of the

elder province of Quebec. But this does not account for the annual decrease in the rate, which undoubtedly arises principally from two causes: 1st, the low marriage rate; and 2nd, the unwillingness of women to become mothers, and the consequent extensive use of artificial checks to prevent conception taking place; or worse still, the wilful murder of unborn children by the practice of abortion.

These are not pleasant subjects to deal with. A congregation is apt to be shocked at any reference to such matters from the pulpit, while it listens without a blush to St. Paul's very plain language about the sins of impurity, in his various epistles. There is a peculiar kind of morality abroad which allows the perusal of the most purient sort of literature, so long as a person is married; the witnessing of most lewd play at the theatre, and the performance of most questionable acts between husband and wife,—but is too modest to listen to any condemnation of such things from those whose duty it is to speak about them.

The clergy may preach about intemperance as much as they like; they may denounce gambling and its kindred evils; they may refer to any other sin in the decalogue in the plainest terms; but any mention of the sin of lust or impurity (especially in a mixed congregation) must be so veiled, or merely hinted at, that no one can be quite certain what is meant and those who are guilty flatter themselves that it cannot be very wrong or it would be dealt with more vigorously and definitely. Such mock modesty is surely born of Satan for the furtherance of his own vile ends. Are we to see the morals of the community degraded, the holy estate of matrimony degraded to a state of monogamous prostitution, and the slaughter of the innocents a thousand times more awful than that of Herod indulged in, without raising a warning voice—without denouncing the iniquity in the name of God? If those whose office and duty it is to teach the people the law of God hold their peace and keep silence, how shall the world be convinced of sin?

It is constantly said by medical and other writers upon this subject, "This is a matter for the Church to deal with," and thank God, the Church is, at last, awakening to her sense of duty, and intends to deal with it. Synods and Conferences are taking it up; some vigorous leading articles have lately appeared in the Church papers on both sides of the Atlantic, and the clergy must face the situation, lay aside their ecologies and speak out with no uncertain sound.

We are in a little corner of the world here. We may be—I trust, we are, freer from these evils, than they in the larger cities of the main-land; but I know we are not altogether free from them, and therefore I must do my part, at the risk of giving offence, and of shocking the susceptibilities